

A CASE OF PURPORTED SPIRIT-COMMUNICATION DUE ACTUALLY TO SUB-CONSCIOUS OR TRANCE MEMORY POWERS.

BY K. M. GOLDNEY

Report of a clairvoyant spirit-message¹ given by Mrs Helen Hughes (medium) on February 10, 1938 at a Meeting held at the London Spiritualist Alliance, 16 Queensberry Place, London, S.W. 7.

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT.

Mrs Helen Hughes lives in the provinces (County Durham), but comes to London two or three times a year and gives both public Meetings and private Sitzings under the auspices of the London Spiritualist Alliance. I have attended at various times about a dozen of such public Meetings.

Mrs Hughes has an extremely charming personality, and personal contact with her will confirm, I consider, an initial judgment of complete integrity. Her clairvoyant powers at public meetings are, *prima facie*, very remarkable. Whilst giving the messages on such occasions, the medium appears to be in a condition of semi-trance; but in private sittings she also attains a condition of deep trance. Her platform work would appear to be particularly suited to psychical research, inasmuch as she gives specific names (both Christian and surnames), dates, place names, etc.; and it was I who urged upon the Research Officer the desirability of endeavouring to bring about the joint investigation of which the initial stages are here reported.

The disadvantage of public Meetings, which all attending them must feel, is the unlikelihood in the packed hall of obtaining a message oneself, and the impossibility of evaluating the messages given by the medium to others. Since I had never myself received a message in these circumstances, and with the object of finding a case which would bear the strictest scrutiny, I started some four years ago to question a few persons who had received striking messages, and was disappointed to find that each person so questioned happened to have had, at some time or other, a private sitting with the medium or had a relative or friend who had had private sittings. In no instance, and on no occasion, was I lucky enough to find a person who had had no

¹ The terms "spirit-message", "trance", "communicator", etc., etc. are used for convenience in a general and recognised sense, and their use does not necessarily entail any specific belief regarding them.

contact whatsoever, themselves or through relatives or friends, with the medium.

It is natural enough that the audience on these occasions should be chiefly made up of those already interested in Spiritualism and their friends, and natural also that members of the audience should have made a point of having a private sitting with a remarkable medium. Further, the fact that they had had a private sitting in no way PROVES that a subsequent spirit-message at a public Meeting can be explained away. Nevertheless the lack of any training in research methods makes the average person a hopelessly bad "sitter", and it would be extremely difficult to establish a claim to para-normality where the receiver of a message at a public Meeting had previously had a private Sitting with the medium at which verbatim notes had not been made. The reader may usefully remember Sir Oliver Lodge's dictum (*Survival of Man*, 10th edition, p. 189) that "hyper-scepticism is more conducive to the development of the subject than hyper-credulity".

After attending a certain number of public Meetings, I decided to have a private sitting myself with Mrs Helen Hughes. During this Sitting—the only one I have had with her—I carried out an experiment which proved to have interesting results.

*Private (Trance) Sitting with Mrs Helen Hughes (booked anonymously)
May 15, 1936 at the London Spiritualist Alliance.*

At this trance Sitting I myself took down shorthand notes of what was said: not verbatim notes, but notes of *all* the names given and any important rejoinders made by myself, etc. My notes were typed out and filed after the Sitting.

The Sitting was entirely negative; although I have had some strikingly good sittings, I am by no means a consistently good sitter and this was possibly the worst sitting I had ever had. My notes show that 28 (or more) names were given, only three of which corresponded by chance with names of deceased persons who had been known to me (a remarkably small number even for chance!) and the relationship of these three was not correctly given.¹ Towards the end of this hopeless Sitting I decided to make an experiment (see forward).

¹ I was forcibly reminded of Myer's description of Mrs Piper's Control, Phinuit (*Proc. S. P. R.* Vol. VI, p. 440): "There were some interviews throughout which Phinuit hardly asked any questions and hardly stated anything which was not true. There were others throughout which his utterance showed not one glimmer of real knowledge, but consisted wholly of . . . random assertions".

Meeting for Clairvoyance given by Mrs Helen Hughes at the London Spiritualist Alliance on February 10, 1938.

At the time of my private Sitting (May 15, 1936), I do not think Mrs Hughes can have known me by sight. Following this private Sitting and the experiment made during it, I made a point of speaking to Mrs Hughes without an introduction on the few available occasions of her visits to London, but by February 1938 I think it probable she knew my name : in any case she knew me well enough to recognise and greet me in passing.

On February 10, 1938 I attended a packed Meeting at the London Spiritualist Alliance, at which Mrs Hughes was giving clairvoyance. I sat far back in the large room beside my friend Mrs R. During the Meeting Mrs Hughes pointed to Mrs R., and the following conversation took place (approximate rendering).

MRS HUGHES : " Now I want THAT lady " (pointing). Mrs R. held up her hand. " Yes, that's right, I want you. There is someone here who has come for you : BESSIE—wait—(apparently listening to a spirit communicator)—BESSIE WHITE. Do you know BESSIE WHITE ? "

MRS R. : " No I don't ; I can't think of anyone of that name ".

MRS HUGHES : " That's funny. BESSIE WHITE—are you sure you don't know her ? No ; wait ; it is not for you but for the lady sitting next to you ". I then held up *my* hand. " Yes, that's right. Bessie White is here for *you*. Do you recognise her ? "

K. M. GOLDNEY : (After a slight pause) " Yes ; I understand that name ".

MRS HUGHES : " BESSIE WHITE—and ALEC—ALEC WHITE. Do you know him too ? "

K. M. GOLDNEY : " Yes ; I understand that also ".

As Mrs Hughes gave the name BESSIE WHITE to me, my mind flashed back to my private Sitting with her of a year and nine months previously. What I dimly remember justified me, I felt, in claiming " I understood " the names given. Nevertheless I had no knowledge of any Bessie White or Alec White in actual fact, nor any clear memory of having heard the names before.

On returning home I immediately looked up the file containing the notes of my private Sitting of May 15, 1936 and read the following commentary, which I had attached to these notes :

Sitting with Mrs Helen Hughes (booked anonymously) May 15, 1936.

" I had been told (Mrs Hughes) was not so good at private Sittings (as at public Meetings), but determined to have one with her. The attached summary was made from shorthand notes taken at the

time . . . by myself. When I saw what rubbish was coming through, I determined towards the end of the Sitting to give false recognition to a set of names, in order to see whether these would later be given back to me at a public Meeting. I intended to go to such and possibly speak to Mrs Hughes (*i.e.* draw attention to my presence at the Meeting) with this in view. At a given point in the Sitting—**THE WHITE FAMILY**—I begin to reply as if the communicators were real and the names veridical ”.

(That is to say, I claimed recognition of the names and relationship given to me by the medium, although in fact the names were unknown to me.)

Turning then to the given point in my summarised shorthand notes at which I claimed this recognition, I found this :

MRS HUGHES : “ BESSIE WHITE is here. Was she a relative ? ”

K. M. GOLDNEY : “ Yes ”.

MRS HUGHES : “ Has Mrs White got her son with her ? ”

K. M. GOLDNEY : “ Yes ”.

MRS HUGHES : “ All the White family are here—ALEC WHITE ”.

K. M. GOLDNEY : “ I didn't know him myself—I knew of him ”.

(NOTE : The conversation is given in my notes in summarised form :

it must be understood that at the time I indulged in a certain amount of dramatisation, suitable to the experiment.)

A description was given by the medium of Mrs White's sudden death by burning. Mrs White then purported to control the medium and communicate directly herself, saying she was doing so for the first time. She spoke with a strong Scotch accent (I had previously agreed with the medium that I had Scotch relations). Her talk was that of a farmer's wife and she spoke of farming conditions, reminding me of a lambing season we had spent together in Scotland (I had never been in Scotland at that time, know nothing of farming or country conditions, and have no Scotch relations except on a grandmother's side some four generations or so back).¹

COMMENTARY

When making my experiment on May 15, 1936, I wondered whether the false information I was giving and the remarks I was

¹ The reader is again referred to the similarity here to the trance Control of Mrs Piper (Rector) ; and his acceptance of misleading suggestions by the sitter. “ Rector ”, says Sir Oliver Lodge, (*Survival of Man*, p. 216) “ . . . is evidently in the position of receiving ideas by a sort of dictation, and need not always be able clearly to discriminate their source, whether from the ultra-material or from the material side ”. Experimental observations of this sort may prove to be of the utmost importance in leading us eventually to an understanding of the trance state.

making to Mrs Hughes whilst she was in a trance would be given back to me at some public Meeting in the near future in the form of a spirit-message. I attended each subsequent Meeting she gave in London and drew attention to my presence by greeting her where possible, but no message came. By February 1938 I had forgotten all the details of my private sitting—had almost forgotten, indeed, the whole experiment—and only the echo of a memory was stirred when the names BESSIE WHITE and ALEC WHITE were given to me. The lapse of time had wiped away all conscious memory of the meaningless details and names given at my private Sitting, and only reference to my files showed that names I had claimed as veridical out of a large number of unrecognised names twenty-one months previously coincided with those given me again so long after.

Mrs Hughes is a very busy and successful medium, booked up (she has told me) for months, even years, ahead. On referring to an official at the London Spiritualist Alliance, I was told that she gave usually 16 private Sittings a week whilst in London, (their rule being that no medium should give more than three Sittings a day); and that if one reckoned an average of 15 Sittings a week for 10 months of the year, it would probably be a fairly accurate surmise (the other two months being free from Sittings on account of holidays, days spent in travelling, occasional sickness, etc., etc. This would of course exclude any unusual year of sickness, which would curtail the number of Sittings given in a year.)

At the rate of 15 Sittings a week for 10 months of the year, we can suppose that Mrs Hughes gave, very roughly, some 1,000 or 1,100 Sittings between the dates of May 1936 and February 1938 (this allows four or five months free of Sittings and sixteen or seventeen months' work out of the twenty-one months).

At my Sitting she produced 28 names. If this can be considered normal, 1,100 Sittings would produce some 30,000 names.¹ A large part of Mrs Hughes' life is spent going from one town to another giving public Meetings and private Sittings to a succession of anonymous or seldom-seen Sitters. Yet in the semi-trance condition pertaining during her clairvoyance, one almost a stranger to her could be correctly given names for which significance had been falsely claimed 21 months before at a single Sitting. This, I consider, goes far beyond any feat of normal memory, and constitutes an example of the striking possibilities of trance memory, presumably akin to the feats of memory (if such it can be called) pertaining to the hypnotic state.

¹ Weeks containing public meetings would probably somewhat *increase* the weekly quota of sitters but *decrease* the weekly reckoning of names.

In making this experiment I had in mind similar experiments made by Sir Oliver Lodge and Richard Hodgson with Mrs Piper, "in order to see what effect on the medium's trance mind was produced by a carelessness or untrustworthiness of Sitters themselves". For example, Professor E. C. K. Gonner, Lecturer on Economics at University College, Liverpool, and a colleague of Sir Oliver (then Professor) Lodge, was purposely introduced to Mrs Piper as Mr McCunn, another colleague, in order to test the effect on the medium's trance mind. The significant result justifies the means, and I have little doubt that Mrs Hughes herself and students of psychical research will have the good sense to recognise the legitimacy of such an experiment, *provided one is careful to appraise it at its due value and no more.*

CONCLUSION

It should be unnecessary to point out that the demonstrated fact that Mrs Hughes can store in her sub-conscious mind the minutest details concerning a Sitter and reproduce these months, possibly years, later, does NOT invalidate the hypothesis and claim that she obtains clairaudient messages from the dead. Such a conclusion would be quite unjustified. Here again we can apply to Mrs Hughes's trance the attributes ascribed by Sir Oliver Lodge to Mrs Piper's Control (Phinuit) when he writes: "The attitude is . . . as of one straining every clue and making use of the slightest indication, whether received in normal or abnormal ways; not, indeed, distinguishing between information received from the Sitter and information from other sources". (*Proc. S. P. R.* Vol. XI, p. 449).

The conclusions we *are* justified in making can be summarised as follows:

(1) The experiment undertaken would appear to demonstrate the possession by this medium (and presumably by others) of subliminal powers of memory in the trance or semi-trance state quite beyond the possibilities of conscious memory. As a result it renders null and void the contention often put forward by those unaware of such subliminal powers that it is "absurd" to suppose that a medium can remember facts concerning the hundreds of Sitters she sees in a year.

(2) Admitting that these possibly limitless powers of memory are in force during trance or partial-trance conditions, it becomes obvious that if we are to test the spiritualist hypothesis, only definite research work under test conditions is of value, and Meetings should be arranged of selected Sitters NONE of whom have had any

contact whatever, direct or indirect (through friends or relations), with the medium, and all of whom are willing to annotate, and answer questions regarding, the material given them with the object of obtaining positive results.

As I have already stated, I consider Mrs Hughes's powers remarkable, and with patience and perseverance—modifying one's procedure in the light of experience gained by experiment and practice—I have every hope that we shall obtain conclusive results.